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A systematic biography of Ernest Mandel

Sunday 11 October 2009, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2009).

A review of Jan Willem Stutje, “Ernest Mandel: A Rebel’s Dream Deferred”, London 2009, Verso, (translated by Christopher Beck and Peter Drucker), 392 pages.

This is the first systematic biography of the main leader and theorist of the Fourth International after 1945, who was, as noted by Tariq Ali in his preface, one of the most creative and independent revolutionary thinkers of our time.

The author is a Dutch historian — the first edition of the book came out in 2007 in Antwerp in Dutch — who has based his research not only on a vast bibliography, but also on a large number of personal interviews with former friends and comrades, and above all, on the material provided by Mandel’s personal archives. It is a work of great quality, combining the rigour of the historian, an obvious sympathy for the personality, and a lucid critical distance which prevents any apologist drift.

The chapters of the book are arranged partly chronologically and partly thematically. Born in Frankfurt am Main in 1923 to a family of (non-practising) Polish Jews of German cultural background living in Antwerp (Belgium), the young Ezra (later Ernest) discovered socialism at the age of thirteen by reading Victor Hugo’s “Les Misérables”! Subsequently he observed: “My political ideas were then constituted, definitively, for the rest of my life”. His leftist father, Henri Mandel grew closer to German refugee Trotskyist circles in Belgium after the Moscow trials. In 1938 Ezra, then aged 15, joined the PSR (Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire – Revolutionary Socialist Party), the Belgian section of the Fourth International. Undeterred by the war and the Nazi occupation of Belgium, he joined the resistance and was arrested for the first time in January 1943, profiting from a lapse of attention on the part of his jailers to escape.

A regular contributor to the clandestine German language newspaper “Das Freie Wort” (“Free Speech”), aimed at German soldiers, here is what he wrote in September 1943: “The Nazi criminal assassins are in the process of exterminating hundreds of thousands of innocent and abandoned men, women and children, considering these Poles, Russians and Jews as “sub-human”... Civilised humanity cannot tolerate this! Each of you, German soldiers, is complicit if he does not protest against these crimes and prefer to remain silent. None of you can hide behind arguments like “obedience to orders” or “the duty of the soldier”... Your task is to stop the Nazi bestiality: mad dogs must be chained!” Imprisoned again in March 1944, deported to Germany, transported from one camp to another, he escaped again, in July 1944, but was recaptured a little after and was only freed in March 1945 by the US army. Mandel’s inveterate optimism — sometimes accompanied by a certain blindness — was reflected, according to a subsequent testimony, in his attitude at the time of his deportation: “I was happy to be deported to Germany, because I would be at the centre of the German revolution”! This obstinate faith in the German revolution — inherited from classical Marxism — would never be abandoned, up until 1990.

In 1944-46 Ernest Mandel was convinced of the imminence of the European revolution: capitalism had reached its final phase of death agony, as Trotsky had put it so well in 1938. It was only little by little that he would grudgingly accept the reality of the ebbing of the revolutionary wave.

Following the orientation of "entryism sui generis" adopted by the Fourth International, he joined the Belgian Socialist Party in 1951, keeping his identity as a Trotskyist leader secret (his brilliant articles in the press of the International were written under the pseudonym "E. Germain"). In 1956 he founded the weekly "La Gauche", with the support of the trades unionist André Renard and the old socialist leader Camille Huysmans; among the collaborators were Pierre Naville, Maurice Nadeau, Ralph Miliband, Lelio Basso and Ignazio Silone. The periodical had a real influence on the socialist and trade union left in Belgium by inspiring a debate on anti-capitalist "structural reforms". The Belgian general strike of winter 1960-61 — considered by Cornelius Castoriadis as "the most significant event of the workers' movement after the war" — was analysed by Mandel as the precursor of a future radicalisation of struggles in Europe. The banning of "La Gauche" by the Socialist Party in 1964 obliged him to leave it and create the Union de la Gauche Socialiste, which had little success.

Parallel to his Belgian activity, "E. Germain" plunged himself into theoretical work — his first significant book, "Marxist Economic Theory" (1962), was an attempt, rare at this time, to economic theory with history. He was active in the internal struggles of the Fourth International, supporting — with a certain critical distance — the theses of Michel Pablo: faced with the "coming war", entryism in the mass workers' parties, Communist or Socialist according to the country, was necessary. The attempt to impose entry into the Communist Party on the French section, in an authoritarian manner, led to a split in France, and subsequently in the International. Discreet in his comments, Stutje, does not hide his astonishment: "Why such excessive centralism? Why the coercion?" In his opinion, "Germain" preferred to sacrifice his own opinion to maintain unity with Pablo. Only in 1963, following a friendly meeting between Mandel and James P. Cannon, the old leader of the US SWP, was the unity of the International restored (in part, at least). During the Congress of reunification (in 1963) "Germain" presented a thesis on the three sectors of the world revolution — the proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries, the colonial revolution, the political revolution in the countries of the East — which broke with the Third Worldism of Pablo, based in Algiers since 1962.

That does not mean that Mandel was not interested in the Third World and in particular Latin America. In 1964 he was invited to Cuba, where he met Che Guevara and drew up a response to the theses of Charles Bettelheim, in defence of central planning against "market mechanisms" and the predominance of the law of value. A second planned meeting with Guevara, at the request of the latter during his visit to Algiers in 1965, fell through. When Mandel visited Cuba again in 1967, Che had already left for Bolivia. At the announcement of his death Mandel rendered homage to "a great friend, an exemplary comrade, a heroic militant".

In May 1968 Mandel was in Paris and participated, on the night of May 10, in the construction of the barricades of rue Gay Lussac, at the heart of the Latin Quarter, with his companion Gisela Scholtz (a young activist in the German SDS, who he had married in 1966), and the French comrades of the JCR (Alain Krivine, Daniel Bensaïd, Henri Weber, Pierre Rousset, Janette Habel) as well as a Latin American visitor: Roberto Santucho, principal leader of the PRT, the Argentine section of the Fourth International.

A little afterwards, in 1969, the 9th Congress of the Fourth International decided by a majority resolution, supported by Mandel, to adopt a strategy of armed struggle in Latin America. Stutje wonders if, once again, Mandel had not sacrificed his personal opinion for the sake of unity, this time with the youth of the French Ligue Communiste and the Latin Americans, favourable to the new course. Having been present at this event, I do not share this analysis (it is true that from 1974

Mandel took his distances from the illusions of this strategy. I remember an informal discussion with him during the 10th World Congress, where I defended the “political-military” orientation of our comrades in the “Red Faction of the PRT” – expelled by Santucho for Trotskyism – while Ernest considered them doomed to defeat. Of course, he was right).

Through these years Mandel produced some of his most important books: “The formation of the economic thought of Karl Marx” (1967) and “Late Capitalism” (1972). The latter is perhaps his most influential book, despite the absence, regretted by several of his friends, of a synthetic view, beyond the brilliant chapters on different aspects of contemporary capitalism. Other important writings of this period include the debate on Trotsky with Nicolas Krassó in the pages of *New Left Review* – which greatly contributed to attracting its editors to revolutionary Marxism – and “Long Waves of Capitalist Development, A Marxist interpretation” (1980) based on prestigious lectures made at Cambridge University.

Mandel’s influence on the rebel youth was at its highest point and he was banned from entering five countries, including France, the USA and Germany. The German interior minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher said in relation to the ban: “Professor Mandel not only supports the doctrine of permanent revolution in his teaching but works actively for the latter”. Karola and Ernst Bloch— the well known German Marxist philosopher — close friends of Ernest and Gisela, wrote to him at this time: “You must really be a giant if they have such fear of you! You are the number one enemy of the dominant classes”. It should be said that the ban did not stop him from entering France clandestinely on several occasion, as in 1971, when he made a memorable speech before 20,000 people at a meeting of the Fourth International at Père Lachaise cemetery at the centenary of the Paris Commune.

The death of his friend Rudi Dutschke in 1979, and above all that — in tragic circumstances — of his companion Gisela in 1982, were hard personal blows. Stutje does not hide his criticisms of Mandel’s inability to communicate with Gisela and help her face her emotional crisis. One year later he married Anne Sprimont, thirty years his junior, whose firmness and independence of spirit would be a great aid to him. At this time most of the leaders of the new generation of the Fourth International were convinced that the cycle opened by May 68 was over, notably after the defeats of the left in Portugal and Spain, but Mandel found it hard to accept this new reality: during the 11th World Congress (1979) he had promised that the next congress would take place in a liberated Barcelona

Mandel always wanted to be a historian — it was Michel Pablo who convinced him to concern himself with political economy — but it was only in 1986 that he finally published his first historical work: “The Meaning of the Second World War”. While undoubtedly an innovative and intelligent work, I do not think that it takes into account the specificity of the Final Solution. It was only after having been criticised on this point that he published in 1990 an important essay — which he included in the German edition of his book — on the “Material, social and ideological premises of the Nazi genocide”.

Gorbachev’s reforms in the USSR would revive great hopes in Mandel and the expectancy of an imminent “political revolution”; the possibility of a restoration of capitalism was not taken into account. His enthusiasm would be still greater during the big demonstrations of November 1989 in East Berlin which would lead to the fall of the wall, which he witnessed. He believed that it was the renewal of the German revolution, vanquished by the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg, and in any case the “biggest movement in Europe since May 1968, if not since the Spanish Revolution”. He would be disillusioned after 1990, with German reunification and the re-establishment of capitalism in the East.

Despite the disenchantment, Mandel would again publish some significant books: “Power and

Money, *A Marxist Theory of Bureaucracy* (Verso, London 1991), an analysis of the social origins of bureaucracy, and *"Trotsky as alternative"* (Verso, 1995), both of which recognised the legitimacy of Rosa Luxemburg's criticisms of the Bolsheviks and the "substitutionist" drift of Trotsky in 1920-21. During his final years, Mandel replaced the classic dilemma "socialism or barbarism" by the apocalyptic one of "socialism or death"; capitalism was leading towards the destruction of humanity through nuclear war or ecological destruction. Unlike Stutje, I do not think this amounted to a "fanatical messianism" but rather a lucid appreciation of the dangers.

Stutje observes, correctly, that Mandel had a tendency to separate body and spirit, and led a very unhealthy lifestyle: too much food, no exercise. After a heart attack in 1993, he had to reduce his activities; he nonetheless agreed — against the advice of his friends — to participate in a debate in New York in November 1994 with a "Trotskyist" sect, the Spartacist League, which specialised in attacks on the Fourth International, and he published a lengthy response to their diatribes. Stutje cites a letter which I sent to Ernest at this time: "This obscure American sect will only remain in the memory of the workers' movement because of your polemic". His last political appearance was at the 14th Congress of the Fourth International in June 1995. A little afterward, in July, he died of a new heart attack. His funeral ceremony, held in September in Père-Lachaise, attracted a great number of people from across the world.

In his conclusion, Stutje pays homage to the exceptional intellectual and literary qualities of Ernest Mandel, and his limitless confidence in human creativity and solidarity. He quotes my own comments on his "anthropological optimism", his confidence in the ability of human beings to resist injustice. But the biography does not take into account, it seems to me, my following remark: the optimism of the will was not always compensated, in him, by the pessimism of the mind (See M. Löwy, "Ernest Mandel's Revolutionary Humanism" in *"The Legacy of Ernest Mandel"*, edited by Gilbert Achcar, Verso, 1999).

In any case, we can conclude with the author of this fine work that Mandel will remain an example for future generations, through his obstinate rejection of fatalism and resignation.

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P.S.

* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV # 417 - October 2009.

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